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# Family literacy's rising policy profile & the evidence underlying it

JD Carpentieri

NRDC (National Research & Development Centre  
for Adult Literacy and Numeracy)

Institute of Education, London

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## UK: Inquiry into Family Learning in England & Wales

- Report (18 Oct): *Family Learning Works*
- How to gain political traction? How to affect policy?
- This policy area (the Home Learning Environment) lacks its own political home
- Lacks powerful “owners” – falls between stools
- Requires joined-up policy work
- Despite the evidence of its importance, FL remains a marginal field



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## EU pre-2011: The invisible family

- How often was “family” mentioned in literacy-focused policy documents?
- **Zero times**
  - E.g. a series of key policy statements in 2009 and 2010 (Council of the European Union, 2009, 2010; European Union, 2010) addressed literacy issues and objectives for children and adults, but had nothing to say about the family



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## 2011 - present: Rising interest

- **All** literacy-related publications and directives include some focus on the family
- Influential 2012 report of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy mentioned “family literacy” **13 times in 103 pages**
  - Argued that “family literacy programmes are under-used by policy-makers”, and recommended that EU, national and regional governments “develop more extensive, larger and better coordinated family literacy initiatives”



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## Rising interest: 2011 - present

- Other examples
  - Picked up by 2012 EU Council of Ministers Conclusions on Literacy
  - FL should play an important role in national literacy strategies, because “[t]here is evidence to show that family literacy programmes are cost-efficient and highly effective” (p. 3)
  - Recent European Commission (2013) proposal for a €3m “European Policy Network of National Literacy Organisations” must include family literacy experts and organisations



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## 2009-11 European Commission-funded family literacy research project

- Led by NRDC, in partnership with NIACE and researchers in 7 European countries (incl. Turkey)
- NB: This project focused on child outcomes
- Main question: do FL programmes work? (Should the EU invest in them? Will this help the achieve its goals / hit its targets?)



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# Do family literacy programmes work?

- What do we mean by “work”?
  - How should we measure success? Huge debate
  - What sort of outcomes matter – to learners, funders, tutors?
- **“Soft” outcomes**, e.g. parental self-confidence; parent and child view of reading as pleasurable; better parent-child bonding; improved academic support skills; learning seen as a normal, enjoyable part of family life
- **Hard outcomes**: quantitative measures of skills gain



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## The case for “hard” outcomes

- Policymakers tend to focus on “hard outcomes” – i.e. measurable improvements in literacy scores
- Must justify budgets to Treasury
- Hard to compete for funding against other policy areas if they can show measurable impact & you can't
- Can produce a “tyranny of effect size”
  - Need for short-term, quantitative evidence of skills gain



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## The growing case for soft (non-cognitive) outcomes

- More research on preschool than FL
- Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckmann:  
Perry High/Scope Preschool project
- By age of 40, society saved \$12.90 for every \$1  
invested
- Better test scores and labour market outcomes, and  
less crime
- Q: What drove these gains?
- A: Non-cognitive aspects of the programme (the  
soft outcomes)



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## Mother-Child Education Programme, Turkey

(Formerly the Turkish Early Enrichment Programme)

Mother participates in:

- Cognitive training programme
- “Mother enrichment programme” (non-cognitive)
  - Quality of parent-child interaction
  - Mother’s self-concept & self-efficacy
  - Socio-emotional development of the child



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## Mother-Child Education Programme: Outcomes

7 years later (early adolescence):

- Better school attainment, better literacy
- Better child and parent attitudes to school
- Higher parental expectations
- Fewer behaviour problems
- More positive parent-child relationships

19 years later (mid-20s):

- Better educational attainment
- Better occupational status



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## The tyranny of effect size

- MOCEP benefited from long-term impact measures
- Programmes often need to show short-term measurable gains, but...
- Assessment tools may not accurately measure change – e.g. not fine-grained enough
- Many families may only be ready for small, “soft” steps forward, which produce longer-term skills gains
- “Soft” changes are necessary, but policymakers may not deem them sufficient



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## What is an “effect size”?

- Number that expresses the difference in attainment between groups (e.g. participants vs matched non-participants)
- Effect size of 1.0 = increase of one standard deviation = moving from 50th percentile up to 84th, or dropping from 50th to 16th
- 1.0 = very large impact
- Q: Do FL programmes, on average, produce a meaningful effect (as measured in short-term)?



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## Context: educational effect sizes

- Instructional quality (“very good” vs “bad”): 1.0
- Skilled use of corrective feedback by teacher: 0.67
- High-quality **Home Learning Environment** vs low-quality: 0.67
- Reducing class size from 23 to 15: 0.30
- Homework for primary school pupils: 0.15
- **Average for all classroom-based educational interventions around the world: 0.40**

# Family literacy meta-analyses: effect sizes

<b>Study</b>	<b>Effect size</b>	<b>Approximate pupil percentile change</b>
<b>van Steensel et al (2011)</b>	0.25	50th -> 60th
<b>Manz et al (2010)</b>	0.33	50th -> 63rd
<b>Nye et al (2006)</b>	0.42	50th -> 66th
<b>Erion (2006)</b>	0.55	50th -> 71st
<b>Mol et al (2008)</b>	0.59	50th -> 73rd
<b>Sénéchal and Young (2008)</b>	0.68	50th -> 75th



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## Conclusions & recommendations from our study

- **Family literacy works:** some (but not all) good programmes produce child literacy gains that are measurable in the short-term
- There is good evidence of major long-term gains
- BUT
- It can be hard to measure non-cognitive gains, and these may be key – but their impacts may not appear for years
- Many programmes are having an impact, but that impact is probably not being accurately measured
- Tyranny of effect size distorts policy and practice



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## Conclusions & recommendations from our study

- Low programme cost: efficient delivery mechanism (tutor time is small relative to intervention time)
- FL usually **complements rather than competes with** in-school initiatives. Low opportunity cost makes FL gains even more significant
- (Don't have to subtract 0.4 from impact)



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# Conclusion & recommendations from our study

## Recommendations:

- FL programmes should be part of every MS's **literacy strategy**
- Literacy strategies should be **lifelong and life-wide**
  - E.g. must address all aspects of child's development, not just cognitive gain
- More comprehensive and strategic focus on families, not just institutions (e.g. schools, ECEC)



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## Obstacles to policy change

- Home: the final frontier
- “Homeless policy area” w/o powerful “owners” – falls between stools
- Marginal field
- Requires joined-up policy work
- Misguided accountability measures: “the tyranny of effect size”



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## Further conclusions & recommendations from our study

- Holistic programmes (focusing on development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills, not just former) appear to be particularly effective
- Produce “hard” and “soft” changes (e.g. parental self-concept), which intertwine to improve Home Learning Environment (e.g. parental literacy practices) and child test scores
- This is consistent w/ research on preschool programmes (see esp. Heckmann)